

Community Shares of Wisconsin Recognizes Barbara Munson 2010 Sally Sunde Family Advocate Award



"Ours was the only family of color in our small Wisconsin town. Experiencing harassment made me want to see, and help create, a better world—one in which children are not faced with stereotypes. In fact I learned from my own family about how invalid stereotypes are, since my dad, an Oneida Indian, was also an Episcopal priest. All of us, children included, need to learn to speak up in positive ways, to reach across cultures, and to build alliances."

— Barbara Munson

Barbara, who is a member of the Oneida (On[^]yoteşa"ka) Nation, has a degree in art and art education and worked for many years as an artist/educator. She was a founding board member of both the Central Wisconsin Children's Theatre and the Oneida Nation Arts Program. As part of Barbara's second career she became an Alcohol and Drug Counselor for Oneida Tribal Social Services. She also worked to support a number of environmental causes affecting Wisconsin tribes.

Barbara is currently retired, though that's not evident from her schedule—she is a member of the Wisconsin Arts Board, a member of the Marathon County Diversity Affairs Commission, and a trained facilitator for the Kettering Foundation's National Issues Forums, which promote public deliberation. In addition, she is a member of the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice state board. Barbara has also chaired the 'Indian' Mascot and Logo Taskforce for the Wisconsin Indian Education Association since the taskforce was created in 1997.

Barbara has always understood that the most effective way to create change is to provide people with the tools to become their own advocates. She started out as an advocate for her own children, in the face of overwhelming public opposition. In 1994 Barbara filed a pupil discrimination complaint against the Mosinee School board, based on the use of its race-based Indian nickname and logo.

She has continued to lead the charge against racial stereotyping and discrimination in the schools, whether it involves children mistreating children, or institutional use of Indian mascots. Barbara noted that regardless of original intent, an Indian logo does not honor Indian people if they are the ones asking that it be changed. "Warrior imagery represents only one small aspect of native culture," she said. "Those of our ancestors who were warriors often gave their lives trying to protect their land and their culture for future generations. Football, on the other hand, is a game."

Particularly troubling, Barbara added, is the use of objects that have sacred significance within indigenous cultures—such as face paint, the drum, or eagle feathers—used not in sacred ceremony, but as entertainment on a playing field.

The Past as a Prelude to Future Work Barbara noted that hers was the only family of color in the small Wisconsin town where she grew up. "In fact I learned from my own family about how invalid stereotypes are, since my dad, an Oneida Indian, was also an Episcopal priest and as a result held a fairly high-profile position in town," she said.

"When I was going through elementary school I experienced a lot of harassment, and it profoundly affected how I view the world," Barbara explained. "I learned how to stand up for myself then, and I also learned to pay close attention to how other people were being treated. Cruelty is the same, whether it is aimed at Indians, Mexican immigrants, Muslims, or any other group or individual. I think that developing that acuity as a child shaped my life as an advocate.

"It's critical for our young people to learn how to stay in spiritual balance while advocating for themselves and others," she continued. "They need to learn to advocate for change without violating their own principles involving respect for all human beings. They also need to learn how to care for each other in their role as advocates.

"Of course it's true for adults as well," Barbara said. "All people of good heart need to listen to one another and support one another. In that way, we really can grow the dialogue about social justice. We really can make a difference—and when we achieve our goals, it's clear that we **do** make a difference."

Passage of the Race-Based 'Indian' Mascot Law The work of Barbara and many others made a difference last spring with the passage of Act 250—the Race-Based 'Indian' Nicknames, Logos, and Mascots Law. The law requires school districts with race-based "Indian" nicknames, logos, and mascots to prove that these do not promote harassment, stereotyping or discrimination if a complaint is filed by a district resident. Ours is the first state in the nation to pass such a law.

"Given that there are no Indian legislators, and that Native Americans make up only 2% of the state's population, this law's passage is a testament to Wisconsin and to our willingness to work together for social justice issues," said Barbara. "People of all ages and ethnicities worked together to make things better for all the children in our state.

"In fact I'm in awe of the deep caring I have seen expressed in the nearly 20 years I have been privileged to work on this issue. While we native people have led this struggle, we have been helped by an amazing coalition of fellow citizens from all walks of life. This clearly shows the best spirit of Wisconsin in action."

She pointed out that in most Indian cultures children are the most highly valued, since they are closest to the Creator and they embody the future. "Many Native traditions teach that each person, each generation, may be able to touch seven generations—and decision-making should be done with concern about the impact on children who will be living seven generations in the future. It's another reason that the Wisconsin law is so gratifying. Knowing that we are helping educate all of our children in a more tolerant environment is one way we care for our children now and in the future."

Barbara said that children form the basis of all of her advocacy work, which is reflected the wisdom found in the Kanuhewelatuksla (the Oneida Thanksgiving address), "in which we give thanks for everything created, from the Earth to the Sky and Beyond. When we get to the Moon, we say, 'We give thanks to our Grandmother the Moon, we work hand in hand with her—for the future faces that are coming.'

"Experiencing harassment made me want to see, and help create, a better world—one in which children are not faced with stereotypes," said Barbara. "All of us, children included, need to learn to speak up in positive ways, to reach across cultures, and to build alliances."